

NEW JERSEY URBAN LEAGUE

Industrial Relations Department

August 10, 1945

To: Mr. Blackburn
Blackburn Products Co.
24 Avenue B
Newark, New Jersey

From: Roy E. Morris
Industrial Relations Secretary

Re: Personnel Problems

As a result of our conference on Wednesday, August 1st and my subsequent discussions with some fourteen of your workers, I am making the following report.

Problem. Blackburn Products Company has been experiencing a higher labor turnover than seems normal for the company. Applicants have been sent from the United States Employment Service who expected to begin work at the company, but upon arrival declined the job offered. Approximately only one out of five workers leaving the U.S.E.S. office talked to the hiring officer of your company or accepted work. There is also a problem presented by the fact that workers remain in the employ of Blackburn Products for only one to three weeks, sometimes only three days. I have talked with seven workers on the day shift and seven workers on the night shift. I have observed closely the work in the plant and physical working conditions there.

Recommendations

Bad Supervision. It seems that on the day shift, workers hollered at and treated without respect for personality. The arrogant attitude of the shipping clerk, his emotional screaming of what to or what not to do, his cursing when riled, and his failure to give any preliminary good understanding of what is expected of the workers, causes resent-

ment among the workers. It should be stated that the workers seem to hold no personal enmity against the shipping clerk, and certainly against no other official of the company. However, it is easily understandable that some more sensitive individuals would prefer not to work under such exasperating circumstances. Laborers are accustomed to either cursing or hearing other workers curse, so the mere use of curse words is not the important factor in the workers' resentment. It is obviously the attitude emanating from the shipping post that is resented. One worker remarked that he overheard the shipping clerk exclaim, after becoming disgusted, "Too bad they didn't have all you fellows (Negro workers at Blackburn Products Company) in the Italian Campaign." (I don't vouch for the accuracy of the words of the statement, but from several workers it appears that the sense of the statement is correct.)

It seems that some very definite instruction needs to be given to the shipping clerk or other supervisory person in physical proximity to the workers, about proper handling of workers there. In normal times a replacement would increase the morale of the workers, but now the difficulty of making a replacement in such a strategic post, and the possibility of the person blamed improving the quality of his leadership, make it appear satisfactory to instruct instead of replacing.

New Workers. On the night shift particularly, and the day shift too, there appears to be poor orientation of new workers. Even older workers in your employ for more than a year, feel uneasy about the lack of interpretation of what his particular job is to each worker. New workers need to know clearly what they are expected to do and what is not part of their job. Blackburn Products is not a very large company but is definitely large enough to have its jobs clearly differentiated and hired for separately. There is a diversification of jobs, and there are various levels of job responsibility. It is important for each worker to know just what he is responsible for and what he is not responsible for. It appears that a worker may be doing one job and be suddenly told to stop and do something else. This may occur two or three times during one eight hour period. In a very small plant of some ten workers where close and friendly relations exist between all ten workers, switching over to other jobs is more easily done. But in this day of specialization workers are in the habit of being told exactly what their job includes, and have been trained by unions and other jealous workers to stick to their own work and not to pick up some one else's work. They develop an automatic reaction to their individual job which makes it easier for them to work steadily.

Diagram of Jobs. It appears that attention should be paid to new workers particularly, and to all workers whenever occasion arises, about what their individual job is. A floor-plan or diagram should be made up which would make it easy for any supervisory personnel to know what the duties are of any man in any particular spot in the plant. It may be necessary to place two or three laborers in jobs as "floaters" with whom it is understood that they might be called on at any moment to do something different or to lend a helping hand wherever needed. Some reward might be offered persons in these categories, in the form of an additional five cents an hour or up-grading to higher pay in more precise jobs.

Recruitment. The solution of the recruitment problem may be found in the following suggestions: (1) There might be printed some thirty placards, say size 24"x18", to be placed in likely places in the sections from which your workers would come. (2) A sound truck may be used for one day or two hours of one morning and two hours of one evening to inform idle or shifting workers of the opportunities of Blackburn Products and the requirements for placement. We stand ready to screen such persons as are attracted by either of these two mediums for your plant. At present we have no facilities to advertise for workers but are happy to send applicants that normally come to our office, to plants where we have a special interest.

Transportation. It appears that Blackburn Products is in need of transportation facilities for the workers on its night shift. The difficulty involved in reaching home after a night shift is a distinctly un-attractive factor that workers consider when interested in a job at any company. It might be possible for some one or two workers with automobiles to have gas allotments obtained for them by Blackburn Products Company, with the understanding and requirement that they carry home as many workers as would fill their cars, who live in the general direction of the owner of each car. The company might pay a rate to the owner of each car to compensate for driving out of his way and for the extra time involved. The workers themselves might be reluctant to pay a set fee out of their pay for this transportation if that fee is above normal bus fare. They would rather seek work where transportation costs are held to a minimum, and that is conveniently served by some transportation facility.

Rest Room Facilities. It is definitely desirable that more sanitary facilities be provided for workers to keep their street clothes in, to bathe after working, and generally

clean themselves acceptably before leaving the job each day. The work is dirty but no more so than work in hundreds of other plants. However, many workers do not wish to go home or to some other engagement or a restaurant to eat, without the elimination of the accumulated soiling. A shower might be installed and lockers arranged so each worker will feel free to get as clean as he wishes before leaving the plant.

Conclusion

It might be well to draw out the following conclusions:

1. Supervision of workers needs to be improved.
2. New workers need to know exactly what their job is, and their job ought not be a shifting one.
3. A floor-plan or diagram should be made up to implement the precise identification of various jobs.
4. The Industrial Relations Department of the New Jersey Urban League will continue to help you to recruit workers. The department feels that the suggestions about recruitment, mentioned above, will be helpful.
5. It will be helpful, if not necessary, for the company to arrange more convenient transportation facilities for workers on the night shift.
6. It will be helpful and a definite advance in working conditions if a shower is installed and lockers arranged for the convenience of all production workers.

On the whole I think the working force of Blackburn Products is doing a fine job. We are now dealing with tension and sub-conscious excitation among the people of all communities, which gives rise to less steady work habits. This causes emotional strain or instability, which is presented more in some individuals than in others. We should look toward keeping such unstable personalities from getting into the employ of Blackburn Products. When such workers get a job they seem just not to want to work; and in a company the size of Blackburn Products, this causes too much damage. It might not be so bad for unstable persons to find work in very large companies where one person laying down on the job is compensated for by extra output of dozens or hundreds of others. Such a person might catch good working habits from good workers; but in a small company, give bad habits to other workers. We shall continue to keep this in mind when referring to Blackburn Products.